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CHELSEA OVERSIGHT PANEL REPORT ON
THE SECOND YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
CHELSEA SCHOOL COMMITTEE - BOSTON UNIVERSITY AGREEMENT
1990 - 1991

I. INTRODUCTION

This is the second report of the Chelsea Oversight Panel, which was appointed by the State Board of Education at the request of Governor Dukakis in June 1989. The Panel, chaired by Newton School Superintendent (and former Chelsea resident) Irwin Blumer, met four times in Chelsea during the 1990-1991 school year, to monitor and discuss the implementation of the agreement between the Chelsea School Committee and Boston University. The Panel's mission, as defined by the State Board of Education and affirmed by the Panel in 1989, is:

...to evaluate and report on whether Boston University is conducting the business of the Chelsea Public Schools in a publicly accountable way that assures genuine access and involvement by parents, school staff and the public in general. The Panel will examine the extent to which Boston University is working together with the people of Chelsea to assure that the project meets educational goals, although it is not the Panel's role to assess the merits of the educational decisions Boston University makes, to act as an appellate board, or to evaluate whether the stated educational goals have been met.

In keeping with the mission, the Panel assess the process by which Boston University is conducting the public business of school governance in Chelsea, with a particular focus on whether BU is maintaining its commitment to run the school system in an open, cooperative and publicly accountable manner.

The Panel issued its first report in November, 1990. Since that time, progress has been demonstrated in the Chelsea-Boston University relationship. Many accomplishments are documented in the Boston University/Chelsea Partnership Second Annual Report 1990-1991 (published by Boston University in the fall of 1991) and in the October 1991 report, The Implementation of the Chelsea School Project: A Case Study published by Pelavin Associates under contract with the U.S. Department of Education). In addition, the First Annual Report of a Different September Foundation 1990-1991 documents impressive fund-raising to support certain aspects of the project, particularly in the area of early childhood education. The Panel has reviewed those reports, and commends them to the attention of anyone interested in the implementation of the Chelsea-BU agreement.

II. FINDINGS

1. **Leadership of the Superintendent.** Diana Lam deserves great credit for the excellent leadership she provided to the Chelsea Public Schools in the 1990-1991 school year, her second and final year as Superintendent. Her energy level was high and her vision of effective education for children remained clear and constant. The system experienced significant growth and change in numerous education areas, and her leadership provided much of the force needed to bring about these changes.

2. **Positive support from Boston University.** Several programs that Boston University either started or sustained and expanded during the 1990-1991 school year show great promise for improving the long-term educational prospects and life chances of Chelsea's students. These exemplary programs, documented in more detail in the reports cited above, include the initiatives in early childhood education (such as the Early Learning Center and the Chelsea Home Instruction Program), the Intergenerational Literacy Project, student health and social work interventions, the continued restructuring of the high school, the development of plans for school construction and renovation, and the expanded involvement of teachers in educational planning and professional development activities. The University has defined a simple and compelling framework for its vision -- children ready to learn, teachers ready to teach, and important subjects being taught -- and has been able to demonstrate significant progress in achieving its educational goals.

3. **Interaction between Boston University and the Chelsea community.** Boston University's efforts to reach out to parents and the larger Chelsea community to develop a more open, two-way communication system in the 1990-1991 school year are laudable and represent continued progress in this area. The work done to define more clearly the relationship between and among the Boston University Management Team, the Executive Advisory Committee and the Chelsea School Committee was helpful in clarifying and ameliorating some of the issues that had been problematic during year one.

The improvements made by the Boston University Management Team to reach out to the various constituencies in Chelsea must be continued, enhanced and accelerated in light of the difficulties facing the school system and the city. As in any school district the responsibilities of leadership in the Chelsea Public Schools call for open and consistent communication, clarity in defining appropriate involvement in the decision-making process, and diplomacy in working effectively with a wide variety of individuals and groups. While the Panel observed

progress during the 1990-1991 school year, Boston University must continue to attend to these issues for the success of the project over the long term in view of many underlying attitudes and even hostilities in the community.

4. **Chelsea's fiscal situation.** This Panel noted in its November 1990 report that, even beyond the need for substantially improved relations between the University and various other groups in the city...

A broader issue is whether the articulated educational goals of the project can be achieved, even over a decade, without substantially increased funding and economic development to provide a solid tax base for the school system. This project began with the assumption that thoughtful and well-informed leadership from a major university could raise additional private funds, combine them with the existing flow of public funds, and use the total strategically to meet the educational needs of Chelsea. It is now clear that this assumption about funding was unduly optimistic. Even with a robust state economy and generous private philanthropy, the resources would be inadequate to address the multiple and complex needs of students in Chelsea.

The Panel heard evidence of various fiscal problems in Chelsea throughout 1990-1991 school year, culminating in June when the Department of Education informed the Panel of a Superior Court order enjoining the city from commingling state and federal education grant funds with other city funds and from spending those education grant funds on non-school department functions. The city's fiscal crisis led to a delayed opening of school in September 1991, and ultimately to appointment of a Receiver under legislation enacted later that month.

The school system may well fare better under a Receiver with Boston University involved than without it, because of the clear educational goals and objectives the University has defined and the management expertise it has brought to the system. Nevertheless, we note also that the State Board of Education's November 1991 Report on Distressed School Districts and School Reform (which included Chelsea among its case studies) presents an urgent call for school finance reform, with a greater state commitment to provide a foundation of equitable, adequate and stable funding for students in communities throughout the Commonwealth and especially in distressed districts such as Chelsea where needs are so acute and the economic base is so weak. The Panel supports that call to legislative action.

5. **Continued role of the Chelsea Oversight Panel.** The Panel sees the inherent value in its oversight role. Its meetings in Chelsea provide an open forum in which community members can raise issues of concern, increasing the accountability of the University in this unique public-private venture in school governance.

Nevertheless, the Panel is mindful that it was established under a previous administration, and even though it takes its charge from the State Board of Education, its mission has not been reviewed since 1989. Moreover, the Panel's ability to fulfill its mission continues to be limited by its lack of staff. Despite the willing assistance of several senior managers in the Department of Education, the budget cuts and layoffs the Department has experienced in the past two years have made it impossible to do what was originally envisioned, which was to hire a part-time staff person for this special assignment.

At this point, the Panel is considering its future role and mission, if it is to continue. The Panel seeks direction from the State Board of Education, as well as feedback from the community and the Boston University Management Team, on whether it has made and can continue to make a useful contribution. If the decision calls for the Panel to continue in existence then the current members request the Board of Education to develop an appropriate and orderly mechanism for the appointment of successor Panel members for the future.